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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the institutional factors that African American male students identified as influencing their educational attainment in higher education. The following research question guided this study: What institutional factors do African American male students identify as influencing their educational attainment at their respective universities? Throughout the years, there have been numerous theories developed to understand the challenge of college student retention. Alexander Astin (1991) proposed one of the first models, the input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model. In this model, there are three sets of elements considered: inputs, environment, and outcomes. Inputs are the family backgrounds, demographic characteristics, and academic experiences that students bring to college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The environment is the range of people, programs, policies, cultures, and experiences that students encounter in college; and outcomes are students' characteristics, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, behaviors, and beliefs as they exist after college. According to Astin's (1985) student involvement is defined as the amount of energy a student commits to their education, the energy a student devotes to their studies, their level of participation in campus organizations, and the frequency of interacts among professors and other students. In contrast, an uninvolved student is apathetic towards his education, does not get involved in extracurricular activities, and infrequently interacts with professors and other students (Astin, 1999).

Introduction

Astin's developmental theory of student retention has five essential components: (a) involvement requires the investment of psychological and physical energy in activities of some

kind; (b) involvement is a continuous concept; different students will invest varying amounts of energy in different objects; (c) involvement has quantitative and qualitative features; (d) the amount of learning is directly proportional to the quantity and quality of involvement; and (e) educational effectiveness of any policy or practice is related to its capacity to encourage student involvement (Astin, 1985). The developmental theory for higher education emanated from a longitudinal study of college dropouts that sought to identify factors that affect student persistence in college (Astin, 1975). One significant environmental factor identified by Astin was the student's place of residence. On-campus living was positively related to academic persistence in all types of institutions and among all students, regardless of race, gender, academic ability, or family background (Astin, 1977, 1982). On-campus students are more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and are more satisfied with their overall college experience. The 1975 study also indicated that having a part-time job (possibly work-study) on campus facilitated retention and persistence. This type of employment will likely increase interaction with other students, staff, and professors.

Vincent Tinto developed another influential model of retention in 1993. He focused on student departure. Tinto's model is primarily concerned with the influences of faculty, classmates, family, and non-college peers on collegiate students. The dynamic of Tinto's theory of student departure is like Astin's theory of student involvement. Tinto described his model as an integrative model of student departure, meaning that students enter college with personal, family, and academic qualities that help them toward college matriculation and individual goals. These attitudes can be altered positively or negatively through interactions between the student and the collegiate institution. When students encounter positive interaction, it contributes to students' integration and academic persistence. Integration is defined as the degree to which students adapt to the values of the academic institution and adheres to the requirements for membership in the community. As integration increases, it improves student retention. Negative interactions inhibit integration and reduce commitment to persist academically. Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure consists of (a) pre-entry attributes, (b) goals/commitments, (c) institutional experiences: academic and social systems, (d) academic and social integration, and (e) outcomes.

In 1990, Bean examined the problem of retention by developing a student attrition model that emphasized the relationship between attrition and students' interaction with the collegiate environment. Bean asserted that students' attitudes influenced their intent to remain in college, and their university experiences impact their attitudes. Bean (1990) argued that there is a strong correlation between student attitudes, intentions, and behavior. Academic persistence or attrition is influenced by the interaction between student background characteristics and the collegiate environment (Bean, 1990). Attrition can be reduced by making efforts to improve academic performance and increase loyalty to the university. Bean asserted that student's sense of belonging was the most substantial impact on freshman attrition.

In 2001, Bean and Eaton developed a psychological model of retention. This model consists of (a) student entry characteristics, (b) environmental interactions, (c) psychological processes, (d) psychological outcomes, (e) intermediate outcomes, (f) attitudes, (g) intention, and (h) behavior. This model assumes that student attrition is affected by personality, skills, coping strategies, and motivation to attend college. Retention impacts the academic and social interactions experienced by students. Positive interactions will lead to positive academic and social integration, and integration increases student's loyalty to the university and heighten academic persistence. This model focuses on coping behavioral theory, self-efficacy theory, and locus of control theory.

Coping behavioral theory is one's ability to adjust to new situations through the assessment of their environment. Students learn to cope with positive and negative situations productively. Self-efficacy theory is the individual's perception of his ability to act in a certain way to assure specific standards (Bandura, 1997). Students believe they can perform well academically. Locus of control theory highlights the extent to which students view experiences as being caused by internal or external forces. A student with an internal locus of control believes efforts are instrumental toward success. Bean and Eaton (2001) recommended that service-learning communities, freshman orientation, and mentoring programs positively impacted coping strategies, self-efficacy, and locus of control for students.

Arthur Chickering developed one of the most influential psychosocial theories on college student development. Chickering's seven vectors of student development are: (a) Achieving competence; (b) managing emotions; (c) moving through autonomy toward interdependence; (d)

developing mature interpersonal relationships; (e) establishing identity; (f) developing purpose; and (g) developing integrity (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). According to Chickering, the college years lead to increased competence in intellectual areas, skills, and interpersonal relationships. Students deal with emotions that could impede their educational processes, such as fear, anxiety, anger, depression, guilt, shame, and romantic attractions. Students grow when they learn to handle intense emotions and control their impulses. College students should also strive to become self- sufficient and develop diverse relationships based on respect and openness. Identity formation involves developing a strong sense of self and formulating career aspirations and personal goals. A strong sense of self involves maintaining a sense of integrity and clarifying personal values and beliefs. Various theories of retention have been developed because of its importance to the future of education.

Degree completion rates for African American males appear troubling. African American female college students tend to excel, while African American males face challenges throughout their matriculation on college campuses (Hilton, Wood, & Lewis, 2012). Starting with their first year in college, the retention of African American male college students has become especially challenging in higher education (Cuyjet, 2006; Habley, Bloom, & Robbins, 2012; Hilton, Wood, & Lewis, 2012; Sax, 2008; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). Over the past 20 years, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported lagging retention rates among African American male students attending U.S. colleges and universities (NCES, 2006). The retention rate for this student population has drawn the attention of college administrators; in fact, there are noticeable differences in degree completion between Caucasians and their counterparts (Sax, 2008).

The purpose of this study was to determine the institutional factors that African American male students identified as influencing their educational attainment in higher education. The following research question guided this study: What institutional factors do African American male students identify as influencing their educational attainment at their respective universities?

Teacher Expectations and Peer Pressure

Another factor to consider that is related to the challenges of African American males in secondary education is the issue of teachers' backgrounds. Kunjufu (2013) stated that students

encounter various types of individuals throughout their school day who influence their academic experiences, such as custodians, referral agents, instructors, master teachers, and coaches. Kunjufu (2013) identified the referral agents as those individuals who usually refer students for discipline infractions or specialized services, while the instructors teach subjects, not students and they do not adjust their teaching methods to connect with students. Master teachers understand the subject matter and are also concerned about learning styles, while coaches also understand the subject matter, learning styles, and the importance of showing students respect for the student's culture (Kunjufu, 2013).

Booker, Lyons, and Pringle (2010) conducted a qualitative study with 48 African American high schools from two high schools in the Southeastern region of the United States. The purpose of the study was to explore the relationship between teacher expectations and the interpersonal perceptions of African American high school students. One high school was 91.9% Caucasian, and the other high school was 27.9% Caucasian. These students were selected by a positive response to a survey question. Face to face interviews consisting of 15 questions was utilized. Students answered questions about school policies, personal relationships, and their interactions with teachers. Over 50% of the African American students who interviewed believed that race was a factor in how their teachers viewed them. Over 75% of the students believed that teachers had lower expectations for African Americans. Many African American students in the study reported that they were discouraged from taking advanced or honors classes. Interview data revealed that students responded well to teachers who were challenging but fair. Many of the students indicated that the best teachers taught English or Mathematics.

Ogbu (2004) has written extensively about the impact of culture on the academic performance of minorities. He concentrated on the differences in academic performance between minority and the dominant group of students. He concluded that the differences were caused by the treatment of minority groups in school and society (Ogbu, 1998). Ogbu later focused on explaining differences in school performance among minority groups themselves. Ogbu (1998) classifies minorities into voluntary and involuntary minorities, stating that voluntary minorities willingly moved to the United States for better opportunities and involuntary minorities unwillingly moved to the United States as a result of slavery.

Voluntary minorities have a positive attitude toward American institutions and society. Voluntary minority communities and parents are strongly committed to their children's education. Voluntary minority students strive for high grades, work hard, and follow the rules. Ogbu (1998) asserted that involuntary communities and parents have ambivalent attitudes toward schools. Therefore, involuntary minorities have developed an oppositional culture to the majority society and tend to distrust school personnel and Caucasians who control the institution. These involuntary minorities have the most difficulties with school adjustment and academic achievement. Examples of involuntary minorities include African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics (Ogbu, 1998). Other studies have questioned the premise that involuntary minority students define academic success as the prerogative of Caucasians.

The burden of "acting white also impact African American students." Acting white may include enrollment in honors classes, speaking standard English, studying for long periods, spending time in the library, or having a substantial number of Caucasian friends. Ogbu (2004) asserted that there are peer sanctions for striving for academic success. In 2003, Ogbu conducted a qualitative study among African American middle-class high school students in Shaker Heights, Ohio; which concluded that African American students appeared disengaged from academic work because of school racial relations, collective identity, culture, language, and peer pressure (Ogbu, 2003). High achieving students may be accused of by their peers of being disloyal to the African American community, and students may fear to lose their friends or suffer from psychological stress. Academic success may be perceived as abandoning their identity with their community, and the peer disapproval could lead to self-doubt and guilt. It is important to note that African American students may experience negative peer pressure that is often unrelated to the burden of "acting white," which may adversely affect their school performance.

In America's 20 largest districts, schools that are predominately African American and Hispanics typically have a higher percentage of teachers with only 1-2 years of experience. African American males are placed at higher risk in these educational settings, as many new teachers might not have had the pre-service teaching experiences in schools with high minority enrollment during their college matriculation. This lack of experience can cause issues with classroom management (Toldson, 2012). Furthermore, schools with low minority populations tend to have more veteran and master level teachers. The Civil Rights Data Collection report also

highlights differences in salaries between teachers at schools with the highest and lowest minority student enrollments. Inequities in teacher assignments significantly impact African American males (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2012). The performance of African American male students is also affected by the underrepresentation of African American male teachers in the nation's classrooms. In 2009, only 23% of African American males who completed their education degrees entered the teaching profession (Toldson, 2011). Caucasian females represent over 63% of the nation's teachers, while African American males represent less than two percent.

African American Men and Women in Higher Education

African American college students are graduating at lower rates than the national average; even those who attended America's largest universities had a graduation rate of 42% in 2013. The graduation rate for Caucasians in 2013 was 62%. This 20% racial gap has continued for over the past twenty years. African American males lag behind their female counterparts on most indicators of student success in college (Sax, 2008). The crisis of African American men has broad implications for higher education in our nation. According to Lundy-Wagner & Gasman (2010), only fifteen out of eighty HBCUs had six-year graduation rates of more than forty percent. In the same comparative report, African American male students earned 34% of bachelor's degrees compared to 66% for African American female students (US Department of Education, 2010).

It is often not documented; however, of the 1.2 million African American males presently enrolled in college, more than 529,000 (42.8%) attend community colleges (Knapp, 2010). Another 11% of African American males attend for-profit universities; community college and for-profit university students generally have lower completion rates than 4-year universities. Although 45% of African American males 25 years of age and older have attended college, only 16% have earned a bachelor's degree (Toldson & Esters, 2012). In comparison, 53% of African American females who have attended college; 19% earn degrees. Although, the number of African American males earning college degrees is increasing; this level of attainment lags behind the rate for African American females and Caucasian males.

African American college student graduation rates are remarkably higher at selective institutions. Notable schools such as Harvard, Amherst, Princeton, and Brown have produced

rates over 90%. Other institutions such as Stanford, Yale, Columbia, Duke, and Georgetown have rates over 85%. Many academically selective institutions have high African American student graduation rates while being firmly committed to affirmative action in admissions. These statistics indicate that African American students are competitive at the most prestigious PWIs in the nation. Among other selective universities, institutions such as Bates College, UNC-Chapel Hill, and the University of Michigan, report African American graduation rates of less than 70%. African American graduation rates vary at the nation's top-ranked institutions (Slater, 2006).

At flagship state universities, the national average for African American college graduation is 42%. Universities such as the University of New Hampshire, California-Berkley, and the University of Virginia graduate more than 70% of their enrolled African American students. However, universities such as The University of Oklahoma, Kansas, Maryland, Rhode Island, and Arizona report graduation rates under 42%. Graduation rates at PWIs seem to be affected by a variety of factors.

A factor that appears to affect graduation rates significantly is the university's racial climate. The climate at some universities is more positive and receptive toward African Americans, and this strongly impacts student retention. Other colleges promote active African American student organizations to increase students' sense of belonging. Furthermore, the presence of a large group of African American students is essential. Institutions with a small African American student population tend to have fewer cultural events and have lower graduation rates (Slater, 2006).

Geographic location is another critical factor in the graduation rate. Universities such as Bates College, Oberlin College, and Grinell College are in rural areas with a minimal number of African Americans. African American students have higher retention and graduation rates at colleges in urban areas. The academic curriculum may also be a factor; African American science majors at PWI may not always receive needed support from faculty. African American student attrition is also significantly impacted by financial aid. Wealthy universities can provide generous financial assistance for low-income students. Substantial financial aid may reduce the tendency of African American students to leave college to assist with family financial responsibilities (Slater, 2006).

A study conducted by Harper in 2012 interviewed 219 African American male college students at 42 campuses in 20 different states who had earned a cumulative GPA above 3.0. The study found that many participants selected liberal arts and selective research universities because they met the academic standards and offered generous financial aid packages. However, the HBCUs were deliberately chosen by many students because of their supportive environments. Despite these factors, only 47.8% of African American males at private HBCUs in the study graduated within six years. Many African American males withdrew for financial reasons or transferred to public universities.

In comparison, African American male students at state universities and public HBCUs were more likely to work off-campus jobs than other students. The African American male student graduation rate at these institutions was 37.3% and 29.4% respectively. The study identified behaviors as conducive to student success. Students actively engaged inside and outside the classroom were more likely to persist through graduation (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Participants were involved in various student organizations and were able to develop relationships with faculty and academically-driven peers. These relationships increased their levels of motivation and coping skills, which led to academic success. Out of class engagement also led to internships, employment, and graduate school admissions. Participants noted that other African American males were less engaged and devoted time to sports, video games, and pursuing relationships with female students.

Successful African American male students at PWIs have also developed the skills to deal with racism on campus productively. African American students have confronted the concept of "onlyness." Onlyness defined as "the psycho-emotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one's same racial or ethnic group" (Harper, 2013). Onlyness created pressure to be the spokesman for people of color. This isolation derives when student have trouble in obtaining information from instructors about their academic progress (Sedlacek, 1999). African American students have reported feeling marginalized due to pressures of having to serve as a spokesperson for their race (Cuyjet, 2006). Participants were prematurely considered academically unprepared by others or as having been admitted because of their ability to play sports or because of affirmative action programs. Caucasian students also assumed that the

participants grew up in urban ghettos and single-parent households. African American student organizations were places where participants learned how to respond to attitudes of racial prejudice effectively. Spirituality also appeared to be another significant factor in student success. Most participants attend worship services during their time in college.

The high rate of college dropouts among African American men at HBCUs has compelled university administrators to implement a wide range of initiatives designed to increase their degree completion rates. The issue of retention at HBCUs is a matter of significant relevance, and HBCUs must implement initiatives to attract African American students because many who choose to enroll at PWIs face academic isolation at majority institutions. On the contrary, some academic scholars asserted that current research on African American men at HBCUs is lacking (Kimbrough & Harper, 2006). A significant amount of attention focuses on the issues of African American students at majority institutions; however, the challenges of African American men at HBCUs requires researching. Contemporary research has shown that the conservative climate of Black colleges can negatively impact the retention of Black men. This conservatism relates to self-presentation, sexual orientation, and faculty responses to students. Furthermore, retention rates may be affected by a lack of financial aid, problems at home, and an unwillingness to seek academic assistance (Palmer & Young, 2009).

Academic Support Programs

Regardless of the increasing diversity in higher education, minority students have experienced lower retention rates than Caucasian students. Various programs created for high school and college students are to increase their chances of success. The U.S. Department of Education created Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (GEAR UP) specifically for low-income and minority students. GEAR UP is designed to increase high school graduation rates and college enrollment rates and to increase knowledge of the college planning process (Ward & Linke, 2013). There are other similar federally funded initiatives for improving the access of minorities to higher education. The term TRIO was used to describe programs such as Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, and Student Support Services designed to assist the transition to college (Kerpelman, Eryigit, & Stephons, 2008). Other crucial academic support programs are summer bridge programs, advisement, mentoring, and tutoring. Strayhorn (2008) conducted a study involving African American and Latino males who

participated in a summer bridge program and found that as a result of participation, both groups earned higher grades. Advisement and mentoring can help first-generation students develop a plan for personal success. Tutoring can improve students' study habits, note-taking, and test preparation skills (Cooper, 2006).

Faculty Interactions

Students' interactions with faculty have significantly impacted the retention rate for African American males. Student-faculty interactions are essential in the development of students' motivation to excel academically (Komarraju, 2010). Informal interactions with faculty can positively impact student engagement (Thompson, 2001).   Informal interactions are important aspects of the college culture and have a powerful impact on student perspectives (Pascarella & Terezeni, 2005). Faculty interaction outside the classroom has a positive impact on students' self-confidence. African American males report different experiences at HBCUs and PWIs. African American students who attend HBCUs experience more encouragement and better faculty interaction than those who attend PWIs (Allen 1992; Cokley, 2000; Cokley, 2002). Palmer and Gasman (2008) conducted a study with 11 African American males who attended an HBCU. The participants reported that professors were supportive, accessible, and served as mentors, role models, and encouraged student participation. These relationships promoted retention and increased students' sense of belonging.

A study by Komarraju (2010) measured seven aspects of student-faculty interactions. Participants were 242 undergraduate students from a mid-size, Midwestern, public university. The sample consisted of Caucasians and African Americans, male and female students. The average age of the participants was 19 years old, and the majority were first-year students. A Student-Professor Interaction Scale, Academic Self-Concept Scale, and the Academic Motivations Scale were utilized. Data were analyzed by Pearson correlation to examine the relationships between student-faculty interactions and academic self-concept. They reported interactions consisting of (a) career guidance, (b) off-campus interactions, (c) approachability, (d) negative experiences, (e) accessibility, (f) respectful interactions, and (g) caring attitudes. Direct correlations were found between positive interactions and academic self-concepts, motivation, and grade point average.

However, the campus climate at PWIs has been a challenging issue for African American students. Campus climate includes respect for other cultures and fair treatment. Minority students perceive the climate less positively than Caucasians (Worthington, 2008). Lee (2010) conducted a quantitative study of 109 students at a PWI located in the southeast United States. The sample consisted of males and females, Caucasians, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans. The department studied was composed of 28 Caucasians and three minorities; 18 males and 13 females. The study found that the non-Caucasians were less satisfied with faculty diversity and expressed a need to increase it. They also agreed more strongly that faculty diversity contributed to their academic experience as well as spirituality and a belief in a higher being.

Learning Communities

Another initiative in higher education that has been utilized to address the issue of retention is learning communities. Astin (1993) stated that the purpose of learning communities is to help first-year college students develop a sense of community through active learning. Learning communities can combat student isolation on college campuses. Learning communities provide a forum for students to express themselves and engage in critical thinking (Jehangir, 2012). Students often register for the same courses which provide the opportunity for consistent interaction and relationship building with peers and faculty.   Students in learning communities have reported a greater understanding of course content and greater involvement in campus activities (Staub & Finley, 2009). At PWIs, learning communities have provided a forum for addressing racial concerns with peers, faculty, and administrators (Derby & Watson, 2006). Roberts (2013) conducted a qualitative study of 20 full-time, first-year students enrolled at an HBCU in South Georgia. The 20 students were members of a learning community on campus. The study consisted of interviews with students 18-21 years of age and revealed several common themes such as (a) social integration, (b) collaboration, (c) engagement, (d) enhanced educational development, and (e) retention. The participants expressed intense satisfaction with the benefits of the learning communities, and those benefits included stronger relationships, improved self-esteem, and increased academic motivation. They also reported that learning communities strengthened their focus, boosted their GPA, and encouraged them to persist in school.

Financial Aid

The role of financial aid significantly impacts the retention rate of African American students. Palmer and Wood (2012) indicated that African American male attrition might be affected by factors such as decreases in federal aid, increases in student debt, and a more significant number of African American students who work throughout their college careers. Stater (2009) conducted a quantitative study at three public universities, which indicated that financial aid had positive effects on college GPA both in the first year and the remaining years of college. However, financial aid now consists of more loans as opposed to grants and scholarships (Lillis, 2008). Student loan debt now exceeds 1 trillion dollars. (Kantrowitz, 2012). College tuition and fees are increasing at an average annual rate of 5.2% (Baum & Payea, 2012). Because tuition is increasing faster than the rate of inflation, grant aid has become more critical for low and moderate-income African American students. Socioeconomic status significantly affects perceptions of college costs and financial aid for low-income students (Bergerson, 2010).

One of the most significant private grant aid programs created to assist low income, high-achieving African Americans is the Gates Millennium Scholars (GMS) Program, primarily administered by the United Negro College Fund. The GMS Program established in 1999 with a $1.6 billion, 20-year grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to assist low-income high achievers. The GMS Program pays the college tuition of 1000 low-income students of color each year. Eligible students must have at least a 3.3 cumulative high school GPA, demonstrate leadership, and perform community service.

Davis (2010) conducted a mixed-methods study with 231 high-achieving, low-income African American students who were part of the 2012 cohort of Gates Millennium Scholars. The purpose of the study was to identify factors that influenced their college choice and the effect of receiving a Gates Scholarship. The findings suggested that being selected as a scholar increased participants' likelihood of attending a first-choice or more prestigious college. The findings also confirm that the participants would have applied to more universities if they had received the aid early in the process. Financial aid has a significant influence on college choice. The purpose of this study was to determine the institutional factors that influenced African American male students' educational attainment. The results of this study should assist universities with strategies on how to retain African American male students.

Methods

The research design for this study was based on a qualitative approach that included face-to-face interviews with fifteen African American male students in three selected University of North Carolina institutions. The face-to-face interview approach was a purposeful interaction in which the researcher obtained information from participants. The researcher gathered in-depth data about students' experiences and feelings about their freshmen year in college. The research was based on individuals' perceptions and experiences. According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012), structured interviews allow the researcher to utilize a specific set of questions to capture the desired responses from the participants.

Qualitative research seeks to understand and interpret human and social behavior as participants in a particular social setting live it. Qualitative researchers often collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issues that are studied. Qualitative researchers talk directly to people, observe their behavior and action while in their natural environment. Qualitative research is useful in developing an intricate, detailed understanding of the issue and empowering individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and to minimize the power relationships that exist between a researcher and the participants in a study (Creswell, 2012). The researcher purposefully selected three universities in the UNC system that had a significant record of admitting African American male students. Institutions A and B were historically Black universities (HBCUs) with similar student populations and academic majors, both with programs designed to retain and recruit African American male students. Institution C was a predominately White institution (PWI) with an excellent admission, retention, and graduation record for African American males. The participants were purposefully selected based on their ethnicity, college major, and classification. The participants who were invited to participate in the study were required to be currently enrolled in one of the selected universities, of African descent, a major in the College of Arts and Sciences, and had completed their freshmen year of college.

Several African American male students from each of the purposefully selected institutions to participate in the study. The collaboration with Student Affairs, the Registrar's office, and the College of Arts and Sciences, at each university, was helpful to purposefully select students to gain a comprehensive perspective of their experiences. With the assistance of

the above offices, the researchers were able to purposely select those individuals who met the selection criteria for the study. Additionally, the participants should have completed at least two years of college and classified as full-time students. Transfer students were also invited to participate in the study. The researchers conducted two separate face-to-face interviews with the participants on their college campuses. The interviews were approximately 1 hour each, and all interview sessions were pre-scheduled with university officials to ensure the researcher did not interfere with the participants' instructional schedules. No identifiable information such as names, birthdates, social security numbers, phone numbers, or medical information was collected. The data was recorded anonymously and will remain confidential. All participants were assigned a code to ensure the anonymity of the participants. The participants were purposefully selected based on their ethnicity, college major, and classification. Therefore, all participants were (a) currently enrolled in one of the selected universities, (b) of African descent, (c) a major in the College of Arts and Sciences, and (d) successful completers of their freshman year of college with a grade point average of 2.5 or above.

Results

The research study consisted of fifteen African American males who attended three universities in the University of North Carolina System. They openly gave their perceptions of the factors that influenced their decision to return to the university their sophomore year and their perceptions of the factors leading to their retention. The majority felt that attending a university with supportive faculty and staff was essential to their decision to return to the university a second year. Analysis of the data resulted in the following themes:

Supportive University Personnel and Concern Faculty

The participants responded to questions on their perceptions of the factors influencing retention and decision to return to the university their sophomore year. Supportive university personnel and concerned faculty were significant factors that contributed to their academic progression and retention. They felt that having a supportive university system was instrumental in their academic progression. The participants shared the importance of faculty understanding the needs of students and working with students who were experiencing personal issues. They confirmed being encouraged by faculty and staff. The findings from this study support the

research conducted by Awokoya and Mann (2011), which found that students benefitted when faculty showed concern for their students.

Student Involvement in Campus Life

Participants highlighted their involvement in several student organizations as a significant reason for them to return to their university the second year. They spoke passionately about the knowledge they achieved by being involved in student activities on campus. Participants shared how their leadership involvement allowed them to connect to the university's administrators and students across campus. The involvement and responsibilities increased the bond between students and the university. This study correlates with the retention theories of Alexander Astin. According to Astin (1985), students learn and persist in college by becoming involved in campus life.

Student Diversity

Student diversity was another major factor that African American male students stated that contributed to their college retention and academic progression. The participants expressed the benefits of getting to know different cultures other than their own. The ability to experience other cultures enhanced their collegiate experience. They expressed that a diverse student population helped them to increase their self-awareness while learning about others. The results of this study support the findings from the study conducted by Awokoya and Mann (2011) that students appreciated the rich mixture of various cultures on campus.

Campus Resources

According to most of the participants, campus resources were a vital aspect of academic retention. They expressed the importance of the library as a resource for their research and studies. The participants further articulated the benefits of tutoring, the writing centers, student disability services, as well as honors programs. The findings from this study are similar to the study by Cooper (2006) that discovered tutoring and other academic support programs improved students' study habits, note-taking, and test preparation skills.

Supplemental Instruction

Supplemental instruction programs were reported to be noteworthy influences on the academic progression and retention for the participants. They spoke candidly about the benefits of supplemental instruction and how this resource helped improve course grades. They explained

how the availability of supplemental instruction impacted their confidence in their classes. This finding supports the study conducted in 2008 by Palmer and Gasman that found a strong correlation between peer interaction and academic success. Astin (1993) also described peer instruction as one of the most potent influences on undergraduate development.

Male Initiatives

Several participants spoke favorably about the impact of male initiatives on campus for African American males. Through male initiatives programs, the participants were involved in community service activities both on and off-campus. They were also able to participate in several cultural enrichment field trips. The male initiatives provided study sessions, and many participants were assigned to live in the same dormitories. Several colleges and universities have designed male initiatives programs to address retention and graduation of African American male students enrolled in American institutions of higher learning. The findings in this study are consistent with the findings of the study by Palmer and Wood in 2012 who found that male initiatives promoted academic excellence, leadership development, build character, increases retention and degree completion.

School Spirit

The majority indicated that school spirit had a positive impact on their desire to return to the university the sophomore year. They appeared thrilled and had a sense of ownership when family members were alumni of their university. They described how school spirit during campus activities helped to inspire their excitement about attending the university and gave them a sense of pride that they had made the correct choice to apply for admission at their university.

Academic Programs

The participants expressed pride in their majors and indicated that this excitement motivated them to stay focus and continue with their academic studies. Many were interested in the STEM initiatives and Honors Programs on their campuses, and they mentioned how the university provided incentives for honors students to promote their academic success. The responses from the participants are consistent with the findings from the study by Palmer and Strayhorn (2008) that indicated that when students are excited about their academic majors, and it promoted retention and graduation. Thus, excitement about one's major is a direct link to retention. It is important to note that some students choose majors solely based on future job

prospects and not necessarily based on their interests, and this often led to problems with students comprehending the subject matter.

Helpful Customer Service

Several participants defined customer service at their universities as being competent and able to provide for students' needs. Many stated that most of the time, customer service departments provided timely responses and had respectful attitudes toward students. The majority believed that they were treated fairly, and that staff did try to assist them. The admissions office, according to the participants, was responsive, and the Registrar's offices were very organized. Some participants commented that the bookstore staff was pleasant and did an excellent job.

Financial Aid

One major issue of concern was related to financial aid. Several participants felt that the financial aid office was understaffed and did not return phone calls. They expressed the need to process student loan refund checks more quickly for needy students. Many participants stated that they believed the university did not receive enough money from the state, and this lack of money affected the university's budget and staffing. They also mentioned the limited alumni giving as a significant issue facing many universities, especially HBCUs. The participants felt that financial aid issues caused many students to leave the university before graduating. The findings from this study are compatible to the findings from several previous studies: (a) Perna (2006) found that financial issues were factors that influenced African American male students to leave college, (b) Awokoya and Richards (2012) stated that many African American male students come from low-income families and were first-generation students, therefore, without financial aid they might not be able to attend or remain in college, and (c) Branch-Brioso (2009) found that many African American male students were compelled to work to pay college expenses or support their families, so financial aid was necessary for their continued attendance in college. They also stated that employment while attending college inhibited their academic progression.

Implications for Change

The participants commented on the lack of campus-wide Wi-Fi, the close quarters in the dormitories, the lack of adequate parking, lack of school spirit, and campus safety.

The need for improved financial aid, academic advisement, transfer student support, and more services for LGBT students were also noted. However, these factors were not significant enough to prevent the participants from returning the sophomore year; they felt that these behaviors made their experience on campus unpleasant.

It is recommended that university administrators solicit responses from current and graduate students to see how the items mentioned could be corrected to meet the needs of students better. Listening to the needs and concerns of students improve retention, admission, and graduation rates. Studies show that when students are satisfied with the university experience, they tend to persist academically and recommend other students to apply for admission to the university, which increases admissions. Therefore, when students are satisfied with the university, they tend to persist, and the persistence and academic progression increases the university's graduation life. The researcher also recommends paying closer attention to the student satisfaction survey administered annually to current student and select those items that students express and leading problems and concerns and begin working to improve the satisfaction of the student body.

The researchers recommend that the university-wide capital campaign have funds designated explicitly to improving university facilities, such as residence halls and dormitories. It is also recommended greater faculty involvement in student activities. University leaders should require faculty to attend at least one student activity each semester, and this should be a part of faculty contract agreements, such as graduations, convocation, founders' day, and the opening sessions at the beginning of the academic year. Studies show that when faculty are engaged in student activities, students tend to do better in those faculty classes and students felt a better connection to faculty when they showed an interest in their activities.

The participants also noted that the universities needed to improve financial aid services, monitor academic advisement, provide support to transfer students, and offer more services for LGBT students. However, these factors were not a significant determinant that prevented the participants from returning their sophomore year; these issues warrant the attention of university administrators. The researcher recommends that university administrators should closely monitor or evaluate these student service offices at least each semester to determine how effective they respond to students' questions and concerns. Since academic progression is

closely related to how effective students are academically advised, how financial aid issues are addressed, how transfer students are acclimated into the university system, and how services for LGBT students are implemented, it is essential that these offices be held accountable to the needs of all students who have chosen to attend the respective university.

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